

**Sermon: dead to sin, alive for God**  
**Romans 6:1-11**  
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How can we live in the mega-city of Cairo with its many people from different cultures and religions, and still be one united community of Jesus Christ? This is not easy - because our church is a church with people from different nationalities, cultures, traditions, even from different religious backgrounds.

How can we as followers of Jesus Christ be one, in spite of major differences? To answer this question was one of the main reasons why our apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome. They suffered from much tension because people had very different views of how to serve God together.

The major problem they faced was that many followers of Jesus Christ with a Jewish background, were happy to have people from other nations and cultures in the church - as long as they behaved like the Jews did.

“Follow our laws, and then you are truly a good follower of Jesus”, they argued.

The people from the other nations could not accept this. “Why do we have to become like you first? Why can we not follow our Lord Jesus in the context of our own culture?”

We know these differences very well of course. Can a Christian drink alcohol? How long must the skirts of the women be? How do we pray? What music do we sing? Is it allowed to smoke the Shisha?

You can probably think of a few more things. Can Christians go out and dance? Enjoy football? Do shopping on Sunday?

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul had made very clear to the Jewish followers of Jesus, that they should stop making their national law into the law book for all Christians. Making the laws of the Old Testament, of Israel, into law for all nations, suggests that we must all change our nationality and our culture before we can be real followers of Jesus.

Paul begins his letter by underlining that this is unacceptable - because it divides the church. And following the laws of Israel, including circumcision and all the laws of what to eat and what to not eat, does not save us anyway. It does not bring us closer to God, as the history of Israel has shown quite clearly.

God, in his grace, has reached out to us through Jesus Christ - the only one of Israel who truly obeyed God, who was truly a human copy of will of God. In our faith, He is central, not the laws of God. By attaching ourselves to him, we become part of the people of God; by attaching ourselves to Him, God sees us as law-abiding Christians.

That is what Paul underlines. God's response to our sin is not more law, but it is grace through Jesus Christ. God does not throw the law book at us, but he sends Jesus Christ.

So be careful that you do not approach other people in church with your own cultural rules; be careful that your interpretation of Holy Scripture, which is always through the lens of our own culture and background, does not drive people apart. Grace as revealed in Jesus Christ brings people together, law apart from Him drives us apart.

### **1 Let us sin, more grace**

For some Jews, this was unacceptable. "So can we break the laws? Is God always gracious, even when we transgress the laws of Israel? So to break the law means to experience more of the grace of God? So yella, let us live wild!"

They were mocking the message of Paul presented it and they accused the apostle of creating sloppy Christians with his approach to law and grace.

And it is true, there have always been people who see in Paul's proclamation of justification by faith an invitation for loose living and maybe there were some of those in Rome as well.

People like the Russian monk Gregory Rasputin, the evil advisor of the Romanov family, the last Russian Czars. Rasputin held that those who sin most, need most forgiveness. So by sinning with gusto, he assumed he would each time experience more forgiveness, more grace, and that would be a better experience than receiving a little grace like common sinners do.

This extreme view of Christian liberty was obviously not what Jesus and his apostles intended. But it did not make Paul hold back on his preaching that God's offer of forgiveness and eternal life is by grace alone, and not through the strict adherence to Jewish laws. Legalism is not the road to God, so it cannot be central in our Christian lifestyle.

### **2 Died and risen with Christ**

Instead, Paul points the church in Rome, and us, to our baptism. Look at your baptism and consider how that should impact your lifestyle.

It is important to realise what baptism meant for those people in Rome - how could it be such an example for those people?

In the first place, most of those people in Rome who heard this letter of Paul, had been baptised as adults. Maybe their kids were also baptised, I assume they were, but in any case, those who heard the letter in the church in the year 56AD had personally experienced their baptism. They had decided they wanted to be followers of Jesus Christ; they had decided to live a new life.

When people were baptised they had to confess their new faith; Yes, I believe in God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Yes I turn away from the life of this world, to live for God.

And most likely, they were then baptised by complete immersion. The early church also knew baptism by sprinkling but immersion was preferred except if there was not enough water.

So, it was an experience with impact. And what did this baptism mean? The Jews in Rome understood very well the implication of baptism. When a non-Jewish man wanted to enter into the Jewish faith, he had to accept all Jewish laws, be circumcised, and be baptised.

The person to be baptised had to cut his hair and nails and he was baptised naked. He had to be pushed fully under water. The legal effect of the baptism was complete regeneration. The person was no longer seen as a Roman or a Greek, but as purely Jewish - he belonged to a new tribe.

He was seen as a newborn child, his past was totally disregarded. He was a new man who had entered into a totally new life.

So when Jews heard Paul speak of baptism making someone totally new, they understood. When believers were baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, what happened? Their former life was ended, they entered into a whole new life.

Baptism means to be incorporated in Jesus Christ; when we were baptised we became part of Christ. And in this way, through Christ, we became part of the people of God. We entered into the life with God.

With all of humanity we were floating in the ocean of humankind, with its problems and troubles and sin. Holding on to some driftwood of belief in ourselves maybe, or holding on to the illusion that we can save our skin by earning much money, or by trying to be a good person.

People without Christ can be very good - but how does it help us to hold on to the driftwood of being good if we are floating in the ocean of being lost?

But when the ark passed by, Jesus Christ, we were drawn into His security.

That is what baptism does for us. We died in the water, but then we got out - into the safety of a the ark of Jesus Christ, the people of God - in the safety of a whole new humankind.

Through our baptism and by holding on to Jesus Christ, we have become participants in what historically happened to him - we died with him, we rose with him, we ascended with him. We are united with Him forever through our baptism.

This obviously also united us as believers in Christ. He Himself is the heart of our new life; He Himself is the heart of our Christian unity. In Him we became one new family.

By our baptism into Christ, our sins are forgiven; our guilt is dealt with; and as new people, we are no longer in the grip of sin. Law is no antidote against sin; being part of Jesus Christ through baptism is.

Grace is no excuse for sin; the opposite is true: His grace took us out of a life away from God, to now live in the world of God, in His Kingdom.

Our baptism into Christ gives us power over sin; it makes it possible for us to withstand temptation.

This does not make us perfect as we often allow sin to pull us into the wrong direction, so we continue to pray, forgive us our trespasses, keep us away from temptation.

But our relationship to sin has fundamentally changed. We are dead to sin because of our baptism. St John Chrysostom, in his Homilies on Romans 10, wrote:

Being dead to sin means not obeying it anymore. Baptism has made us dead to sin once and for all, but we must strive to maintain this state of affairs, so that however many commands sin may give us, we no longer obey it but remain unmoved by it as a corpse does.

We do sin again and again, there is no need to beat around the bush. So we need to renew our baptism by daily repentance and by the confession of our sins.

### **3 So live dead for sin and alive for God**

Baptism is effective. Some see it as a symbol only, but I think this underestimates the meaning and the power of baptism. The act of baptism effectively puts us into the world of God because our baptism caused a real unity with the death and resurrection of Christ.

And being connected with Jesus Christ also meant the beginning of the work of the Holy spirit in our life.

To consider yourself dead for sin is not like a game of let's pretend. What Paul means is, you *are* dead for sin and alive for God. This new state of life has been graciously given to us by our union with Christ. That is a reality in God.

Now all this by itself does not make us live a life for God. That is exactly why Paul has to write about it, and why he has to convince his readers that their baptism points them into the direction of living a life for God. This calls for personal efforts. Hard work.

Now, so as to stay dead to sin after Baptism, personal effort is called for, although Gods grace continues to be with us, providing us with great help, says John Chrysostom in his homilies on Romans 11.

Paul had to endure many heartbreaking disappointments with those who had become christians until he could see Christ formed in them. He had to write letters, preach, admonish, be angry, be kind, because living the new lifestyle that belongs to Jesus Christ does not come naturally. It is a lifestyle that must be taught.

### **Conclusion**

Gods mercy does not give us permission to sin. Gods mercy should make us live for him. Just as the love of your parents was no excuse for going against their will but an invitation to please them all the time.

You were baptised - signing that you belong to the Kingdom of God - so let us live for Him. And that includes leaving behind all things that do not belong to his kingdom of light.

With Christ we died for all things bad - let us with him now live for love and peace and joy, for the glory of God.

AMEN